

SUPREME COURT OF RHODE ISLAND

Newport School Committee v. Rhode Island Department of Education; Cumberland School Committee v. Rhode Island Council on Elementary and Secondary Education

Newport School Committee · No. 2021-37-M.P. and 2021-38-M.P.; PC 19-4024 and PC 20-31 · Decided February 3, 2026

SUMMARY

The Rhode Island Supreme Court reviewed consolidated cases concerning whether municipalities must reimburse the Department of Children, Youth, and Families for educational costs of children placed in residential treatment programs. The per curiam majority held that the governing statutes require reimbursement for per-pupil special-education costs only and do not obligate municipalities to reimburse general-education costs where the statutory reference to general education had been removed. The Court quashed the Superior Court’s decision, while Chief Justice Suttell dissented.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Rhode Island
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Associate Justice Erin Lynch Prata; Chief Justice Suttell; Justice Goldberg; Justice Robinson; Justice Lynch Prata
JURISDICTION	Supreme Court of Rhode Island
DECIDED	February 3, 2026
DOCKET	2021-37-M.P. and 2021-38-M.P.; PC 19-4024 and PC 20-31
DISPOSITION	quashed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The Department of Children, Youth, and Families petitioned for writs of certiorari to review a Superior Court judgment requiring Newport and Cumberland to reimburse DCYF at the per-pupil general-education rate for educational services provided to children placed in residential treatment programs. The Supreme Court had previously resolved the special-education-rate issue and ordered supplemental briefing on whether municipalities owed any reimbursement for general-education costs.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Statutory interpretation and other questions of law are reviewed de novo; factual findings of an administrative agency receive great deference.

PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published
PARTIES	Department of Children, Youth, and Families v. Newport School Committee, Cumberland School Committee

TOPICS

statutory interpretation legislative intent plain meaning rule administrative procedure act writ of certiorari

PRACTICE AREAS

administrative law education law municipal law appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether G.L. 1956 §§ 16-64-1.1 and 16-64-1.2 require a municipality to reimburse DCYF at the per-pupil special-education rate when a child placed in a residential treatment program did not receive special-education services.
2. Whether the statutes require a municipality to reimburse DCYF for general-education costs when the statutory reference to general-education costs was removed in 2001.

HOLDINGS

1. Municipalities are not required to reimburse DCYF at the per-pupil special-education rate when no special-education services were rendered and no special-education costs were incurred.
2. G.L. 1956 § 16-64-1.1 does not obligate municipalities to reimburse DCYF for the cost of general education for students placed by DCYF in residential treatment programs who are not receiving special-education services.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The plain and unambiguous language of the statute does not include reimbursement for general-education costs.” (10-11)

“However, it is not our role to read words into a statute where they do not exist, particularly words that were removed from the prior version.” (11)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

In 2018, the Family Court placed two children, A. Doe and M. Doe, in DCYF's temporary custody and designated Newport and Cumberland, respectively, as the residences of the children's custodial parents for purposes of educational financial responsibility. DCYF placed the children at Harmony Hill School and Meadowridge Academy, residential treatment programs that provided educational services, but neither child received special-education services. DCYF sought reimbursement from the municipalities at the per-pupil special-education rate, while the Superior Court determined that the municipalities owed the per-pupil general-education costs.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

DCYF placed two children in residential treatment programs, neither of whom received special-education services, and sought reimbursement from Newport and Cumberland at the per-pupil special-education rate. The Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education ruled for DCYF. The Superior Court reversed, holding that the municipalities owed the per-pupil general-education costs. The Supreme Court previously held that municipalities were not required to pay the special-education rate absent special-education services, then received supplemental briefing on the remaining issue and quashed the Superior Court's decision.

DISPOSITION

quashed

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The record was to be returned to the Superior Court with the Supreme Court's decision endorsed therein.

CASES CITED

- Newport School Committee v. Rhode Island Department of Education, 316 A.3d 1159, 1163-1164 (R.I. 2024)
- Ryan v. City of Providence, 11 A.3d 68, 70, 75 (R.I. 2011)
- Iselin v. Retirement Board of Employees' Retirement System of Rhode Island, 943 A.2d 1045, 1049 (R.I. 2008)
- Twenty Eleven, LLC v. Botelho, 127 A.3d 897, 900 (R.I. 2015)
- Zambarano v. Retirement Board of the Employees' Retirement System of Rhode Island, 61 A.3d 432, 436 (R.I. 2013)
- Athena Providence Place v. Pare, 262 A.3d 679, 681 (R.I. 2021)
- Retirement Board of Employees' Retirement System of State v. DiPrete, 845 A.2d 270, 297 (R.I. 2004)
- State v. Bryant, 670 A.2d 776, 779 (R.I. 1996)
- Prew v. Employee Retirement System of City of Providence, 139 A.3d 556, 561 (R.I. 2016)
- State v. Clark, 974 A.2d 558, 571 (R.I. 2009)
- Commerce Park Associates 1, LLC v. Houle, 87 A.3d 1061, 1067 (R.I. 2014)
- Woods v. Safeway System, Inc., 102 R.I. 493, 495, 232 A.2d 121, 122 (R.I. 1967)